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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR
INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND
SECURITY

SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-second year

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 19 of General Assembly resolution 51/195 B of 17 December 1996, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it every three months during its fifty-first session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). The report, which covers the second three-month period following the submission on 16 March 1997 of the first progress report (A/51/836-S/1997/240 and Corr.1), is also submitted in response to the request of the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Military situation

2. A stand-off between the Taliban and the opposition persisted in the first two months of the reporting period, with neither side able to gain significant ground. Sporadic fighting continued in four areas: the entrances to the Salang pass and the Panjshir valley north of Kabul; the Ghorband valley bordering Bamyan and Wardak provinces in the central region; the Badghis province in the north-west; and the eastern provinces of Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar.

3. This military deadlock, however, was broken on 19 May when General Abdul Malik, a key commander of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA), staged what at the time appeared to be a pro-Taliban revolt against the NIMA leader, General Rashid Dostum. General Malik, supported by

other NIMA commanders, took control of Mazar-i-Sharif on 24 May. General Dostum fled the city and took refuge in Turkey. General Malik then assumed the leadership of NIMA.

4. Seizing the opportunity, the Taliban went on the offensive. During the night of 26 and 27 May, their forces, reinforced by defections from the opposition, gained control of the Salang pass. The Taliban also infiltrated a large number of their troops, estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000, into the areas north of the Hindu Kush for the first time. Those troops were given free passage through Pul-i-Khumri by the Hezb-i-Wahdat faction controlling the area. Some 3,000 troops proceeded to Mazar, and others went to Kunduz and Takhar provinces. A Taliban delegation, led by Mullah Mohammad Ghaus, flew into Mazar-i-Sharif on 27 May for talks with General Malik on coordination between the two forces. However, the infiltrating Taliban forces immediately started to disarm the NIMA and Hezb-i-Wahdat forces and to impose a strict interpretation of the shariah Islamic law, including the closure of girls' schools and a ban on the employment of women.

5. The already complicated situation took another twist on 27 May when General Malik, apparently alarmed by the Taliban's rush to disarm his troops, decided to change sides again and attack the Taliban forces. The attack, launched by the joint forces of General Malik and the Hezb-i-Wahdat, followed the issuance of Malik's order not to surrender arms to the militia. The Taliban forces, outnumbered and outgunned in a place far from their sphere of influence, withdrew from Mazar on 28 May. The Taliban reportedly suffered a few hundred casualties, while several hundred more were taken prisoner. Mullah Ghaus and Mullah Abdul Razzak, Governor of Herat, were among the high-ranking Taliban officials detained by the forces of General Malik.

6. Capitalizing on the Taliban's retreat from Mazar-i-Sharif, Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, another pillar of the opposition alliance, broke out of the Panjsher valley and cut off the northern side of the Salang tunnel on the Salang/Pul-i-Khumri road on 28 May. The Massoud forces then, on 29 May, took Golbahar and Jabal-os-Siraj, located at the southern end of the Salang pass, effectively trapping an estimated 2,000 Taliban forces north of the Hindu Kush.

7. The deteriorating situation in Mazar-i-Sharif forced the evacuation of staff of the United Nations and non-governmental organizations from the city. The United Nations evacuated a total of 65 international aid workers, journalists and foreign consul staff on 29 and 30 May, although a number of international non-governmental organizations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) staff decided to remain in Mazar. the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has been closely monitoring possible refugee movement to neighbouring Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

8. The general situation in the north remains tense and fluid as of the writing of this report. Fighting continues at the western, central and northern fronts, as well as to the north of Kabul. In the west, the front line returned to the Bala Murghab in the province of Badghis. In the central region of Hazarajat, the two sides are locked in battle in the Shebar pass lowland areas around Sheik Ali and Lulenji in Ghorband valley, as well as in Wardak province.

There are reports of renewed military reinforcements by the Taliban in an attempt to resume the drive to conquer the north. The opposition is reported to be gearing up for the necessary defence.

9. The military balance appeared to have tilted in favour of the Taliban when General Malik revolted against General Dostum. However, the situation moved back towards its previous status when General Malik changed his allegiance again a few days later. The Taliban maintain their control of about two thirds of Afghanistan. Among the opposition alliance, the forces of General Malik control the five northern provinces: Faryab, Jowzjan, Saripul, Balkh and Samangan, while Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani and Commander Massoud are in control of Kunduz, Takhar and Badakshan, as well as part of Kapisa. Bamyan is under the control of the Hezb-i-Wahbat, led by Mr. Karim Khalili. General Malik announced on 3 June that the opposition alliance, which had been called the Supreme Council for the Defence of Afghanistan, had been renamed the United Islamic Salvation Front of Afghanistan.

Political situation

10. The political situation in Afghanistan during the period under review was dominated by the military events detailed above. The continued hostilities have made the Afghan factions even more uncompromising and unwilling to accept repeated overtures from the United Nations and others for talks on a ceasefire. Despite the setback suffered in Mazar-i-Sharif, the Taliban still appears determined to attempt to overrun the northern region by force. The opposition is strenuously resisting this. Unabated foreign interference in support of one faction or another has also enabled the antagonists to continue on a confrontational path.

11. The Talibans ambition to capture the north of Afghanistan and to gain control of the entire country further aggravated the concerns of a number of countries in the region, many of which view this as a serious threat to their borders and to the peace and security of the region. Countries in the region and beyond have held extensive consultations at various levels on the evolving Afghan situation. Among the issues discussed in those consultations were the territorial integrity of Afghanistan, the possible outflow of refugees, destabilization of the border areas caused by the fighting in Afghanistan and the flow of illegal arms and drugs.

12. The Afghan situation was discussed at the summit meeting of the 10-member Economic Cooperation Organization held at Ashgabat on 13 and 14 May. At the meeting, central Asian countries expressed their concern at the continuing hostilities in Afghanistan and called for a ceasefire and peaceful negotiations among the parties through the mediation of the United Nations.

13. At its Twelfth Ministerial Conference held at New Delhi from 4 to 8 April, the Movement of the Non-Aligned Countries declared that a military solution to the Afghan conflict was not a desirable objective and called upon all the Afghan parties "to cooperate with United Nations efforts to facilitate national reconciliation and reconstruction of Afghanistan, specifically to mediate an end to the conflict and facilitate the implementation of a comprehensive settlement to be agreed upon by the Afghan parties, which would include, inter alia, an

immediate and durable ceasefire, the demilitarization of Kabul and the establishment of a fully representative and broad-based transitional government of national unity."

14. The question of the representation of Afghanistan remains pending among States concerned. To date, three countries have recognized the Taliban as the legitimate representative of Afghanistan: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Some others continue to recognize the government of Professor Rabbani.

Humanitarian situation

15. The humanitarian situation remained serious and was further aggravated by renewed fighting. A rapid food and nutrition assessment was recently undertaken by United Nations agencies in view of reports that a near-famine was likely to develop in Afghanistan. The assessment report concluded that the situation was difficult but not alarming for the short term. The supply of food from Pakistan had resumed after a temporary halt. The report indicated, however, that although food, particularly cereals, was available in the local markets, the purchasing power of the population was extremely limited. The report recommended that the World Food Programme (WFP) should continue until the end of June 1997 the expansion of its safety net scheme under which an additional 110,000 beneficiaries are covered in Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar. It also recommended that donors should meet the food aid requirements of WFP, ICRC and non-governmental organizations. A periodic population-based nutrition survey has been recommended to avert high mortality related to malnutrition. A joint mission of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and WFP is currently carrying out a comprehensive assessment of crop production and food aid needs in Afghanistan.

16. On 21 April, the first meeting of the Afghanistan Support Group was convened at Geneva by Mr. Jan Pronk, Minister for Development Cooperation of the Netherlands, facilitated by the United Nations with the participation of donor countries and concerned organizations. The Group discussed key assistance issues with a view to sustaining the consensus reached at the International Forum on Assistance to Afghanistan, held at Ashgabat in January 1997. The Group agreed to support the implementation of a strategic framework and a peace-building programme of international assistance, including emergency relief and reconstruction, and to endorse measures to ensure a common approach on the upholding of women's rights. In addition, it was stressed that the political and non-political aspects of United Nations activities should be more closely linked.

17. The issue of women's and girls' rights remains a priority for the United Nations and the international community. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs sent a mission to Afghanistan in April to review the issue. Its recommendations and those of the Humanitarian/Resident Coordinator are currently under consideration for the purposes of developing a unified position for all United Nations agencies working in Afghanistan.

III. ACTIVITIES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Meeting of States with influence in Afghanistan

18. On 16 April, I convened the second meeting of Member States with influence in Afghanistan in New York, using the formula that had been adopted for the first meeting held in New York on 18 November 1996. The purpose of the meeting was to reassess the situation following recent political and military developments and to discuss how best to promote a negotiated settlement of the conflict and reinforce the United Nations peacemaking efforts. At my request, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. Kieran Prendergast, presided over the meeting, at which the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the following Member States participated: China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Italy, Japan, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America and Uzbekistan. I informed the President of the General Assembly and of the Security Council of the results of the meeting by letters dated 1 May (A/51/886-S/1997/347).

19. Mr. Norbert Holl, Head of UNSMA, briefed the meeting participants on the current situation and his peace efforts in Afghanistan. The meeting demonstrated that consensus continued to exist on the grave dangers of continued armed conflict for the region and on the central role of the United Nations in coordinating efforts to achieve a peaceful solution. The participants uniformly appreciated the efforts of Mr. Holl and of UNSMA to promote agreement on a ceasefire and negotiations between the factions. While recognizing the need for all concerned countries to be involved in the search for peace, they also stressed that such initiatives should be coordinated with the United Nations.

20. All participants agreed that the territorial integrity and unity of Afghanistan must be preserved. They supported the view that the only solution to the conflict remained a national accord based on recognition of the legitimate interests and rights of all the Afghan people. There was consensus that all foreign interference must cease, although, as usual, there were differences on how to achieve that goal. The flow of arms into Afghanistan remained a preoccupation, and a number of countries supported an arms embargo, referring to the action taken in that connection by the European Union. Some called for the Security Council to take similar action. Others, however, expressed doubts about the practical effectiveness of such a measure and whether it could be applied in an even-handed manner.

21. There continued to be widespread support for an international conference in due course to support the results of negotiations. A number of concrete proposals were put forward for an intra-Afghan dialogue under the auspices of the United Nations to be held outside Afghanistan, possibly with Member States as observers. Several participants repeated their offer to host negotiations and/or a conference. Many favoured the expansion of United Nations consultations beyond the leadership of the factions to include broadly representative Afghan communities and personalities. Some particularly supported the intensification of the contacts of Mr. Holl and the Special Mission with concerned States.

22. All participants voiced their distress at the continued plight of the Afghan people, with special attention drawn to women and girls. Several emphasized the connection between a political settlement, rehabilitation, reconstruction and peace-building.

Activities of the Security Council

23. The Security Council continued to be seized of the developments in Afghanistan and requested to be kept regularly informed of the recent events in the country and of the activities of UNSMA. The Council held several consultations on Afghanistan during the period under review, and repeatedly renewed its call to the warring factions for a ceasefire and for peaceful negotiations through the United Nations.

IV. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

24. Despite the difficulties caused by the prolonged hostilities, UNSMA continued its pursuit of an immediate ceasefire and negotiations, through its good offices, between the warring parties. On 7 April, Mr. Holl briefed me in New Delhi on the recent developments in Afghanistan and on the activities of the Special Mission. He then travelled to New York for consultations with senior Secretariat officials. On 14 April, Mr. Holl briefed the Security Council on Afghanistan and then participated in the second meeting of countries with influence in Afghanistan on 16 April. On 21 April, Mr. Holl took part in a meeting of the Afghanistan Support Group at Geneva, where the issues of continued humanitarian assistance and support to the United Nations peace mission in Afghanistan were the focus of the discussion.

25. Mr. Holl and his team maintained regular contact and held several meetings with the leaders of the Taliban and the opposition alliance, as well as with other Afghan personalities. Mr. Holl's interlocutors among the Taliban leaders included the Taliban acting Foreign Minister Mullah Ghaus, and his deputy, Mullah Jalil Akhund, and the Governor of Kandahar, Mullah Mohammed Hassan. The opposition leaders Mr. Holl met included General Dostum, Commander Massoud, Professor Rabbani and Mr. Khalili. All the meetings were held in Afghanistan.

26. As part of the United Nations peacemaking efforts, Mr. Holl tried to convene a meeting between leaders of the Taliban and the opposition at a mutually agreeable place, such as Islamabad or Ashgabat, in the first part of April 1997. This high-level political meeting was intended to follow up on the two meetings of the Intra-Afghan Working Group, which the Special Mission had convened at Islamabad in January and February 1997. However, despite all efforts, the meeting failed to take place, largely because of differences between the parties on the venue, level and composition of the representation.

27. The Head of the Special Mission held consultations in various capitals in the region and beyond, including Washington, London, Islamabad, Moscow and New Delhi, and met officials of several other interested countries.

V. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

28. Recent events have proved yet again that the question of Afghanistan is not susceptible to a solution by force. The imposition of one party's will over others, even if it appears to be successful in the very short term, cannot bring lasting peace and stability to the country and the region. This conviction is held not only by me but also by the international community at large. The futility of continued fighting in Afghanistan has been repeatedly underlined by Member States at such occasions as the second meeting of the countries with influence in Afghanistan, as well as by the Security Council.

29. The situation in Afghanistan remains volatile. The warring parties seem bent on resolving their problems through military means rather than through peaceful negotiations and have paid no attention to the many calls by the Security Council, the Head of the Special Mission and other countries for a ceasefire and dialogue. To make matters worse, the conflict is increasingly being fuelled by strong ethnic feelings between the predominantly Pushtun Taliban on the one hand and the Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks, who comprise the opposition camp, on the other. All Member States concerned claim to agree that peace is needed in Afghanistan, but it appears that a number of them are not yet ready to put concerted pressure on the warring factions to stop this senseless civil war.

30. While the warring parties have shown little interest in a peaceful solution, it is noteworthy that some individuals and groups of Afghans have taken initiatives to mobilize moderate, influential Afghans inside and outside Afghanistan who are not directly involved in the ongoing fighting. Insofar as those Afghan initiatives aim to give a voice to the majority in Afghan society who have been silenced by the prolonged warfare, I regard them as very positive. Mr. Holl is closely following up on the initiatives and is reporting to me on a regular basis.

31. The 1997 United Nations Consolidated Appeal for Emergency Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan, which is seeking US$ 133 million, has so far received contributions totalling $26.7 million, which is only about 20 per cent of the requirements. This is not enough for the United Nations to sustain humanitarian activities at a satisfactory level. I should therefore like to urge the international community to provide generous support to the United Nations Appeal for the impoverished people of Afghanistan.

32. Prospects for peace are bleak for the immediate future, but I am determined to pursue a negotiated solution to the Afghan problem. The potential cost of inaction is too high. The overwhelming desire for peace among the majority of the Afghan people is undeniable. I should therefore like to conclude the present report by repeating my appeal to the Afghan factions to come to their senses and to return to the negotiating table immediately. I should also like to call upon the Member States concerned to cease their military support to the warring factions, to address in a more substantive way how best to resolve the Afghan conflict and to coordinate their efforts in this regard closely with the United Nations.